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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 001516

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/11/2016  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KISL](#) [KIRF](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [MY](#)  
SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DEBATE LEADS TO GOVERNMENT  
WARNINGS

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 680  
[B](#). 05 KUALA LUMPUR 4424  
[C](#). 05 KUALA LUMPUR 3784  
[D](#). KUALA LUMPUR 157

Classified By: Political Section Chief Mark D. Clark for reasons 1.4 b,  
d.

Summary  
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[1](#). (C) Pressure from non-Muslims to examine religious freedom in Malaysia has generated passionate debate here in recent months, leading to PM Abdullah's July 25 warning, repeated on August 11, for the media and public to refrain from openly debating contentious religious and racial issues. For the first time, the PM's warning also extended to Internet-based news providers and bloggers. Non-Muslims concerned with the creeping Islamization of Malaysian law, politics and society recently attempted to organize several public fora to discuss the perceived erosion of Malaysia's constitutional protection of non-Muslims' religious freedom. The events were either canceled or shortened by police inability (or unwillingness) to control vocal Muslim protesters who had gathered at the venues. Meanwhile, hardline Muslims have organized their own new groups to "defend Islam." The country's law minister recently acknowledged that vocal Islamic hardliners were pushing the GOM to take stands, pursue policies and enact legislation "we don't believe in," in order to win greater political support from conservative Muslims. The Malaysian government is clearly concerned over the direction and divisiveness of the religious freedom debates and their potential effects on Malaysia's inter-religious, inter-ethnic relations. Keeping a lid on the current debate will prove no easy task given the deep concerns of non-Muslims over gradual Islamization in Malaysia, the politically-charged religious conversion cases now before the courts, and the political leverage wielded by conservative Muslim Malays. End Summary.

The Constitution as a Religious Rallying Point  
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[2](#). (SBU) In March, the Malaysian Bar Council sponsored an 800-participant conference on the question of whether the Malaysian constitution should be amended to improve protection of the religious freedom of non-Muslims. The conference came on the heels of controversial secular court rulings that ceded jurisdiction in religious conversion cases involving non-Muslims to the country's Shari'a courts (refs A, B and C). The atmosphere at the gathering, which was not covered in the mainstream media, was much more highly charged than similar events we had attended. The Q&A session concluding the conference lasted more than two hours and included statements by two Malay Muslims deemed religious "deviants" by the GOM. Human rights activist and leading Bar Council member Malik Imtiaz told the audience that while non-Muslims were working to amend the constitution to clarify

and protect their religious rights, a vocal minority of Malaysian Muslim leaders were seeking to expand the influence of Islamic law into areas now governed by secular law. "Muslim aspirations are becoming the basis for pursuing an Islamic state in contradiction to the constitution," Malik said. He warned that if moderate Muslims and non-Malays did not become more active in promoting religious freedom, "Malaysia could become a theocratic state in the next five to ten years."

13. (SBU) At a similar event on May 14 in Penang, the police intervened to abruptly end a forum entitled "The Federal Constitution: Protection for All." Police explained they were unable to properly control the approximately 500 vocal Muslim protestors who arrived to disrupt the event. The forum was organized jointly by local NGO Aliran and an umbrella body of 13 NGOs named "Article 11" (referring to the freedom of religion clause in Malaysia's constitution). In the wake of the Lina Joy, Nyonya Tahir, M. Moorthy, and S. Shamala court cases related to religious conversion (refs A, B and C), the organizers intended the forum to discuss religious freedom in Malaysia - especially with regard to the constitutionally defined, turbulent jurisdictional interface between the civil and Shari'a court systems. As the third of a series of road shows on the topic, the May 14 event was the first to encounter an organized demonstration.

14. (SBU) The fourth such forum hosted by the Article 11 coalition was similarly cut short on the advice of the police, after 400 Muslim protestors gathered outside the event's hotel venue on July 22 in Johor Baru. Although the function ended nearly two hours earlier than planned, only the question and answer session was eliminated; all speakers on the forum's panel were given the opportunity to make their

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full presentations. Demonstrators included representatives from PAS Johor, UMNO Youth, as well as NGO groups like Jemaah Islam. They chanted verses and waved banners reading, "We are ready to sacrifice for Islam," "Don't touch on the sensitivity of Islam," and "Stop Anti-Islam Act."

#### Muslims Also Organizing Themselves

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15. (SBU) On July 24, over 10,000 Muslims attended a forum in Kuala Lumpur entitled "The Shari'a and Current Issues." Centered around the contentious issue of apostasy, speakers called on authorities to strengthen the country's Islamic institutions. The forum resolved that Malaysia be widely viewed as an Islamic state, that legal prohibitions against proselytizing Muslims be strictly enforced, and that individual behavior of Muslims be considered a matter of public accountability. In addition, Muslim civil and Shari'a lawyers recently set up a group called "Lawyers in Defense of Islam" to counter perceived attacks on Islam, and several Islamic NGOs have likewise formed a coalition called "Pembela" (Defenders of Islam). Pembela planned to hold a demonstration on July 28 in front of the Federal Court building to push for rejection of Lina Joy's application to renounce Islam (refs A and C), but a public statement by PM Abdullah (see paragraph below) forced them to cancel the demonstration.

#### Prime Minister Warns Against Religious Debate

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16. (SBU) On July 25, PM Abdullah Badawi urged an end to public discussions about sensitive religious topics. He ordered an immediate stop to all Article 11 fora, claiming that "they are bound to raise tension in Malaysia's multi-religious society." He also warned the media by saying, "The issue of religion is very sensitive, more sensitive than the issue of race, so the press should be responsible and not blow it up. They should not report news that could cause anger or tension, and result in something

undesirable." For the first time, in his dual role as Internal Security Minister, the PM expanded his recurrent warnings to the mainstream media to include alternative news sources such as bloggers and Internet-based news providers. He reminded the alternative media that they face potential GOM action under the same criminal defamation and sedition statutes as mainstream media providers. On August 6, Deputy Internal Security Minister Fu Ah Kiow reiterated the PM's earlier comments by saying, "Actions that provoke Muslims' sensitivities to the extent of disturbing the peace are in conflict with the federal constitution."

Applicable to Muslims, Too  
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¶7. (U) The Prime Minister's comments also applied to Muslim groups, a point repeated and emphasized by Home Minister Radzi Sheikh Ahmad on August 10. "What the Prime Minister said is meant for everybody. It is not applicable only to non-Muslims... The Prime Minister asked everyone to cool off and hold on." The Home Minister spoke in reaction to two seminars announced for the August 12-13 weekend focused on defending Muslim rights and combating apostasy.

¶8. (C) A leading member of Article 11, Ramdass Tikamdas of the Human Rights Society of Malaysia (HAKAM), expressed his disappointment to us over the PM's statements and questioned the Prime Minister's claim to represent all Malaysians. He said, "How can the PM, who claims to be the PM for all Malaysians, say we cannot discuss these issues?" Commenting on the general silence emanating from moderate ethnic Malays about the religious freedom debate, Tikamdas warned, "If reasonable and rational Malays do not make a stand now, all will be lost." Another Article 11 leader, Ivy Josiah, questioned, "What Islam Hadhari is the PM advocating? Is he supporting mob rule?" She noted Abdullah's targeting of Article 11 activities, while Muslim groups used mosques to advance their religious and legal agendas, as they did with their recent forum on apostasy. The Article 11 group is seeking an appointment with Abdullah to present their concerns.

Protecting the Islamic Flank  
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¶9. (C) In January, the PM's non-Muslim cabinet members sent him a letter requesting a review of constitutional provisions affecting the legal rights of non-Muslims. The historically unprecedented letter was quickly withdrawn by the ministers, following strong public rebukes by UMNO Muslim leaders (ref

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D) and conservative Muslim intellectuals. During a recent public roundtable, Law Minister Nazri Abdul Aziz claimed that vocal Islamic hardliners within the Islamic opposition party PAS were prompting the Malay ruling party UMNO to pursue actions and policies "we do not believe in" in order to win greater political support from Muslims. He proclaimed, "We are doing a disservice to our nation," and he urged secular-minded Muslims to "speak up, even at the risk of being labeled as infidels or apostates." Constitutional law expert Shad Saleem Farruqi told us, "In this country in the last twenty years, a certain amount of Talibanization has taken place," as Malay politicians aligned themselves with an increasingly conservative Muslim electorate. Malaysian Bar Council President Yeoh Yang Poh expanded on Shad's assessment, predicting that Malaysia was "on the road to disaster," if constitutional guarantees on religious freedom and separation continued to erode.

Comment  
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¶10. (C) The Malaysian government is clearly concerned over the direction and divisiveness of the religious freedom

debates and their potential effects on Malaysia's inter-religious, inter-ethnic relations. Ironically, Prime Minister Abdullah made possible these debates through gradual relaxation of GOM controls over the press and public expression since 2003. Both non-Muslim and Muslim groups have taken advantage of this new space to raise publicly the most sensitive questions concerning the role of Islam in Malaysia and the meaning of religious freedom for Malaysia's substantial non-Muslim minorities. The Prime Minister's comments and those of his cabinet have drawn a boundary to such discussions; we will see how far the government is willing to go with enforcement and whether this favors the politically powerful Muslim majority. Increased self-censorship in the media is one likely outcome. Keeping a lid on the current debate while avoiding a major reversal of civil liberties will prove no easy task given the deep concerns of non-Muslims over gradual Islamization in Malaysia, the politically-charged religious conversion cases now before the courts, and the political leverage wielded by conservative Muslim Malays. In the end, Malaysia still will need to face the fundamental issue of the constitutional guarantees on religious freedom.

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